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ABSTRACT

A conception of schooling and its associated conception of educational policy, designed to join rural schools with their communities in a powerful force for rural development, are described in this paper. Information is presented in the form of answers to pertinent questions and covers the following areas: the revitalization of rural communities; the skills and competencies necessary to provide local people with the ability to utilize, coordinate, and direct the resources necessary to revitalize rural areas; the rural school as a revitalization force; and the changes in schools. The Rural Education Program's basic rationale and component activities are described in terms of environmental improvement for rural children, youths, and adults; community involvement; employment of trained consultants in rural schools; new curriculum development strategy; and educational policy reformation at the state and national levels. (PS)

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EDUCATION AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

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EDUCATION AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

The Rural Education Program of the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, with which I amd my coauthors are associated, is strongly committed to the position that education, and in particular formal schooling, can serve as a positive force in developing revitalized rural communities. We wish to share with you today a conception of schooling, and its associated conception of educational policy, which we believe can join rural schools with their communities in a powerful force for rural development.

DO WE WANT TO REVITALIZE RURAL COMMUNITIES?

The national trend in at least the past fifty years has been toward increased centralization and increased size of organizational units. With this has been associated a decline of rural communities. There are fewer people in rural areas, proportionate to the national population, than lived there some fifty years ago. There has been a decline in the number of services available locally to rural communities. School districts have been consolidated. Farms have been consolidated into larger, mechanized units. People have been consolidated into large megalopolises. Smallness has not been a valued concept.

There are signs, however, that this trend is reversing. As one group of distinguished sociologists expressed it,* the point of diminishing returns in the quality of human relationships seems to be reached at a much smaller organizational size than the point of diminishing returns in terms of economic productivity. In the past institutions and communities grew to the optimum size for the economic values involved and

* Planning Paper for the National Institute of Education

overrode the human values. With the ecology movement questioning the value of endless increased productivity, there is a trend toward seeking (perhaps recapturing) the qualities of close human relationships. We would cite the commune movement, the T-group or encounter group movement, and even a renewed interest among professional sociologists in writing about and trying to define a "good community," as signs that the trend is reversing. There is a recognizable trend in a variety of fields toward smallness, and a recognizably increased concern about human and interpersonal values.

Movements in three fields are of particular interest to us: the "new town" movement in architecture; in education the increasingly common attempts to break up large city school systems into smaller districts, each with a distinct relationship to their surrounding communities (and the move to break up large schools into smaller subunits, often called "houses"); and in communications technology the prediction that the day is not far when modern communication techniques will make it unnecessary for large numbers of people to live in close geographic proximity to participate in a rich and diverse life.

All of these lead us to believe that there will be a renewed interest in small communities. The modern world is coming to value the close human relationships that are possible only in small units. Since small communities and rural areas are virtually synonymous, we believe there will be a move to revitalize rural areas. And, rural America will continue to represent a significant segment of American citizenry. The 1970 census, for the first time in many decades, did not show any increase proportionately in the population of urban areas, or any significant decrease in rural areas. The rural population of the United States seems to have stabalized.

CAN RURAL COMMUNITIES BE REVITALIZED?

Numerous efforts of the past fifty years suggest the futility of attempting to revitalize rural areas by a policy of pumping in outside resources through programs run by experts from some central location. We believe an alternative strategy is possible which could yield much greater revitalization to a rural area from a given quantity of resources. The strategy is one of developing the capability of rural people themselves to identify needed change, to initiate change and to utilize the broad range of resources already available for breathing new life into their schools and communities. This self-help strategy will yield commitment, a sense of ownership of changes, and above all a far more efficient utilization of diverse resources targeted on what the people themselves feel are their priority problems than will ever be achieved by centralized experts. The strategy will be more effective even in the absence of additional resources, for it will make better use of what exists. If we could assume that additional resources will be available for the support of small communities in response to the trends cited above, the strategy would be all that much more effective.

WHAT ARE THE SKILLS AND COMPETENCIES NECESSARY TO PROVIDE LOCAL PEOPLE WITH THE ABILITY TO UTILIZE, COORDINATE AND DIRECT THE RESOURCES NECESSARY TO REVITALIZE RURAL AREAS?

While we cannot answer this question difinitively, we believe that what local people need is expertise in political action within the state or county region, and expertise in using (indeed, manipulating) bureaucracies to make them do as they are supposed to, serve their clients rather than use them. In addition, people must develop the maturity and ego strength to accept defeats as well as victories, to plan and maintain over

a lengthy period of time a strategy for accomplishing their desired goals, and to develop the political structure within their local community to establish and maintain consensus and cooperation related to the long range plan.

A component of our Rural Education Program at the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory focuses on developing in local people just such political expertise with respect to their own schools and the county and state educational bureaucracy. We suggest only that this should be extended to other arenas. America has not in the past trained people specifically in the competencies and skills necessary for them to gain control of their own lives. In fact, there is reason to believe that the socialization forces within the schools operate to condition human beings to fit into large factories or other occupational patterns which require the very antithesis of individual initiative. We see the conditions for living effectively in the modern world, and particularly the conditions necessary to revitalize rural areas, as dependent upon major revolution in the nature of training made available to rural people; and we propose training them specifically in the competencies of social organization, cooperation, and bureaucratic manipulation, thus giving them the power to control their own destinies.

CAN THE RURAL SCHOOL SERVE AS A REVITALIZATION FORCE?

The question of whether the public school can serve as a leader in the revitalization of rural communities is an intriguing one. Certainly the school as an institution has the potential of leading and guiding; any change is dependent on education of some sort, and the schools are the most widely recognized legitimate educational institution. In its present form, however, it has not been an effective agent of change.

Despite the overwhelming influence education exerts on young people, either positively or negatively, the institution itself has had increasingly less success in accomplishing what the society expects of it. Part of this failure, of course, is the result of wildly increased expectations. As the culture has diversified, it has become the job of the schools to raise "disadvantaged" segments of society to some optimum level of literacy, while at the same time preparing them to leave the home and school with skills necessary to find employment and lead conventionally successful lives. The school has assumed, however unwillingly or unsuccessfully, not only many of the functions of the family but also some of the apprenticeship functions formerly subsumed by industry.*

But a large part of the failure, also, seems to suggest that schools are almost inherently incapable of being agents of change. Numerous well-planned programs, well funded, have yielded virtually negligible results--for instance, in compensatory education. The failures of the public schools have recently become the subject of reports and manuscripts and books from every political persuasion in our culture. To take just one typical example, an exhaustive report for the President's Commission on School Finance entitled "How Effective is Schooling," examined not only compensatory education programs such as Title I and Title III, but also the criticisms of Illich and the other now-famous critics of the public schools themselves. In all of the Commission's careful, detailed, and cautious conclusions, they, like most others, point to one thing: schools have not been able to compensate for cultural disadvantage, and this casts doubt on their ability to serve as agents of social change. Schools appear to perpetuate the existing social order.

* See Robin Williams, Our Changing Rural Society, for a further explanation of these forces.

Is anything known about the reasons for the failure of schools which might suggest ways to make them into effective agents of social change? One of the predominant criticisms is that education suffers from its own institutionalization. As Illich comments:

> ...The equal right of each man to exercise his competence to learn and to instruct is now pre-empted by certified teachers. The teacher's competence, in turn, is restricted to what may be done in school. And further, work and leisure are alienated from each other as a result.*

Thus, institutionalization and alienation make schools as resistant to change as the community with which it is all too often at odds. Change must involve the entire machinery, from the teacher training institution to the individual classroom teacher, from the administrator to the certification requirements of state legislatures. While this particular obstacle is common to urban and rural schools alike, as the same training institutions feed both levels, George Henderson notes in AMERICA'S OTHER CHILDREN, that rural schools are among the slowest changing organizations in America.

In addition, the opposition to change in any community is manifest and especially so in rural communities which tend to rely heavily on tradition. Sociological and educational research alike have found the home and family group to have dominant influence on young people, and tradition to have precedence over change of any kind. Extensive studies have shown that without sufficient deference of local traditional leaders and customs, effective change is impossible.

Opposition to change in education is generally, however, a function of the inability of the community to understand on what change is based.

* Ival Illich. Deschooling Society.

> The degree of powerlessness experienced by adults in rural areas detracts significantly from their parental concerns for their children's social development...More often than not, the parents of the disadvantaged child will view the school with pessimism. Generally, this is due to the fact that their own school experiences were unpleasant. Therefore, they have difficulty convincing their children that school is a good place. This does not mean that all of the parents are hostile toward the school; most of them hope that somehow their children will achieve success in school. Education is still perceived by most low-income parents as <u>the</u> way out of poverty for their children. Rather than being against education, most are hesitant to become involved with it.
>
> (AMERICA'S OTHER CHILDREN)

This analysis suggests that the hope of change through schooling must have some positive base in the home and community. There must be a high degree of congruence among the learning environments in the home, community and school, and therefore it is essential that there be some kind of extensive community involvement and participation in any changes made in schools. Further, it is distinctly pessimistic about the possibilities of schools <u>as they are</u> serving as a revitalizing force.

CAN SCHOOLS CHANGE?

If the schools are to help our rural communities perpetuate their strengths and remedy their weaknesses, some changes must be made despite the obstacles of community cultural lag and educational institutionalization. In broad outline we know what these changes must be. Schools must equip students to change and to learn to cope with an environment we cannot wholly predict and crises we can only scarcely imagine. This entails a different kind of school, one which facilitates mastery of processes rather than products, emphasizes decision-making competencies not recitation, and nurtures diversity rather than conformity.

As Carl Rogers puts it:

> ...In today's world, the goal of education must be to develop individuals who are open to change, who are flexible and adaptive, who have learned how to learn, and thus are able to learn continuously. Only such persons can meet constructively the perplexities of a world in which problems are spawned much faster than solutions. The goal of education must be to develop a society in which people can live comfortably with change rather than with rigidity. In the coming world, the capacity to face the new appropriately is more important than the ability to know and repeat the old.*

This type of undertaking obviously necessitates a new kind of school. It necessitates a school which is able to provide a viable, real environment where young people can learn while doing, one in which they can learn how to learn, gain confidence in their ability to meet and deal with new situations, and find meanings to live by.

It requires also a school which does not focus exclusively on educating youth but deals also with education for adults.

The problem is that schools must also become credible to the community, and congruent with community values and attitudes, so that the school and community can work together to effect the necessary changes neither of them have been able to effectively undertake alone. Even if we knew what the decision-making and coping skills are, it would be fruitless to focus on them in schools, if there was no support at home and in the community.

WHAT CHANGES WILL BRING ABOUT THESE KINDS OF SCHOOLS?

Outside of school, in the home and community, behavioral change is continually being produced. Two conditions prove to be highly significant in these settings. First, out-of-school activities are aimed at some

* Carl Rogers. Educational Change.

form of adjustive satisfaction. That is, the activities are undertaken to serve the wants of the person or group. Their primary thrust is not to learn but to produce or acquire something--an object, an event. Second, behavioral change is always a consequence of these activities. Hence learning is instrumental to the accomplishment of some goal and is rarely the goal itself. This is a basic biological principle generally overlooked. If the conditions that contribute to the development of life behaviors outside of school can be recognized, legitimized and replicated in the school, probably the most significant step possible will have been taken toward making the school an effective tool for social change. Students would find school relevant. Parents would observe a direct relationship between behaviors valued by the home and those being emphasized and influenced by the school. Employers and community leaders would understand and support the school because of the obvious harmony between competencies valued by the community and the outcomes of formal instruction.

The Rural Education Program at the Northwest Lab also has a component that is designing the specifications and developing the materials and procedures to replicate in school the basic learning conditions that operate outside of school. This new model of schooling will be available as an option open to local people when they begin to initiate changes in their schools.

As we all know, schools are a weak institution and prosper only at the tolerance of the taxpayer. Unless educators take careful note of the necessity to continually build consensus which supports their work, public retaliation will come through the default of bond and tax issues, the recall of school boards and the firing of teachers. If the changes needed in the schools, particularly in small rural communities, are not

understood and in fact initiated by the community, their lasting power will be weak indeed, as mountains of carefully-documented innovation attempts attest. How, then, do we hope to get such a radical version of schooling into practice?

The key process we believe is one of putting the rural citizens, educators and students into a position where they can initiate educational change, and helping them to do it systematically. We have a lot of trust in the power of the logic and sheer rationality of the new schooling model. It utilizes the personal experience of any group of people who are systematically engaged in an educational improvement enterprise.

To conclude, then, let me describe the Rural Education Program's basic rationale and component activities. Because of our assumptions about learning, human dignity and each individual's fundamental right to a measure of free agency, we are prevented from designing and in any way imposing upon a school, group of students, or a community yet another kind of wall-to-wall solution to their educational problems. In the first place, such an approach does not take into account the rights of others, and so would be immoral in a free society that values the principles of agency and self-determination. Also, it would not work because of lack of commitment and sense of ownership on the part of those who were expected to participate in and benefit from it.

The Laboratory's Rural Education Program is committed, therefore, to the notion that a better environment for rural children and youth and for rural adults, as well, must--and can--evolve from an inquiring group of citizens, educators and students who have gotten together in new ways, with new skills, more information and ready access to some new kinds of help in the form of materials, resources and trained consultants. The lack of success in implementing lasting change in rural

education in the past has occurred because change strategies failed to adequately increase the capacities of rural people and the capacities of the rural school and its community to cope with the intended innovation. The interventions we plan will focus upon the generation of a process through which rural schools and communities can realize their potential for (1) creating culture, (2) meeting and maintaining democratic social relations, and (3) developing individual self-realization.

Because the process must be both a learning and a problem-solving one, we have incorporated the best of what is known about learning and change. We propose to assist rural school staffs, rural students and rural citizens to become engaged in the systematic processes of inquiry and problem solving--through which they can have a more significant role in making decisions that affect them collectively and as individuals. Our strategy will be to engage the school staff and the community in systematically and continuously improving the learning environments for the students, by providing more activities that increase their competence to make and execute decisions regarding their own individual and group lives.

The process is to be activated in rural schools and rural communities by trained consultants supported by special educational products developed by the Laboratory. The process is also to be activated by teachers who have been especially trained in strategies for engaging students in the self-enhancing processes of problem solving, self-management and in-life learning. Students and teachers will be supported in these processes by additional educational products especially developed by the Project for that purpose.

We believe that many contemporary curriculum and instructional models violate some of our basic assumptions about learning, human dignity and emerging social values. Inquiring schools and communities must be able to examine proven education practices that are in harmony with these assumptions. The Project proposes, therefore, to design a new type of curriculum that will serve as a model to local curriculum developers in producing materials that help rural students engage in transactions with their environment in pursuit of goals important to them. We reject the idea of a curriculum that is pre-engineered to a specified set of objectives. Equally we reject the romantic notion of a free-wheeling curriculum with no objectives. The curriculum development strategy we propose is the preparation of some thoughtfully prepared curriculum specifications, sample materials and development guidelines that will improve the capability of curriculum developers to prepare carefully conceived independent instructional units. Our curriculum materials will serve as templates for both the development and flexible use of materials and encourage enhanced decision-making and decision-executing competencies.

The overall strategy then, that was selected to meet the critical rural educational needs is to develop and encourage the use of a process that will create in our rural school systems and communities they serve the capability for systematic change and participatory decision making. The ultimate goal of this strategy is the creation of more appropriate and effective learning experiences for rural youth so that they might gain more control over their lives and destinies. This strategy, because it is aimed at releasing the potential of rural people and their institutions, is called the Rural Futures Development Strategy.

We believe that a reformed state and national educational policy that emphasized the enhancement of local decision-making power, in the context of having rural citizens learn how to gain access to knowledge, learn to follow systematic processes and develop understandings and procedures for distributing power within their community, would enable those citizens to guide their schools toward becoming more effective instruments of change, and lead to the revitalization of rural communities.